

Luke 21:25-36

Today we begin the season of Advent, as well as a new church year. Heretofore, we had been in Year B. Now we are in Year C. The main difference is that we shift from reading the Gospel of Mark to reading the Gospel of Luke. The traditional theme of the First Sunday of advent is Hope. As Christians, we have hope. We have hope because of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the celebration of which we anticipate with great eagerness. But we also have hope because our Lord has promised to return. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. We await with hope the second advent of our Lord.

Because we are not a people without hope. We know that this life — as good or bad as it may be at times — is not the end. This is only the beginning. We spend time as corporeal beings before assuming our next form as spirits. Even at that, we will still be awaiting the final culmination in our resurrected bodies. The book of Revelations talks about the spirits of those in heaven calling out, “How long?” How long until the new heaven and the new earth? There is always more to it with God. We can never exhaust God’s glory and greatness.

There are different ways to respond to this revelation. One is to take the attitude that this world, transient as it is, is not worth dealing with. Why try to eliminate hunger or poverty? At some point, God is going to call time and none of that will matter. Anything we do achieve doesn’t really count because it will be wiped out ultimately anyway. The problem with that approach is that it denies the inherent goodness in God’s creation. God declared creation “very good.” Some would argue that that changed with Adam and the fruit, but if that were so, why does God spend so much time calling us back in our physical manifestation? Why would God deign to become flesh at all if not to redeem flesh? If all of this is for naught, why did God bother?

No, I can’t subscribe to the notion that we are just to sit back and let the world take its course. God has entrusted us with God’s creation, and we are to be stewards of it, not just passive bystanders. I have talked before about the idea that if we truly believe that we will live eternally, then we will be the kind of people we are for a very long time. If we think that everything ends when we do, then there is no need to care about the future. But as Christians, we know that there is always more, thus we have a responsibility to take a very long view towards creation. We can’t be like the Mad Hatter and just move to the next place when we have messed up the one we are in. Up until the point that we are called to be with God, we are to work for the kingdom right here, right now.

We are, unsurprisingly seeing as we are Episcopalians, called to take a middle way. We are to work as though this is all there will ever be, but keep in mind that there is something greater coming. Now is the time that we become the people we will be forever. Are we the kind of people who work until the end? Or do we throw up our hands in despair and figure none of it matters anyway? Despair is not an option for the Christian. Trust that it is all up to God, but work like it is all up to us.

That makes for a difficult decision, sometimes. Is our work not bearing fruit because we are not doing the right work, or because we have not given it enough time to ripen? How do we know if we are on the right track or not? How do we know if what we feel called to do is really of God and not just of ourselves?

There is no easy answer. One thing is to consider what is coming from our labor. If what we are doing is building up, growing the community, uplifting, loving, then that is a good indication we are doing the right thing. If what we do and say brings only strife and conflict, hatred and hard feelings, it is probably not going the right way. Over and over, our Lord tells his followers that their job is to sow the grain. How it grows and when it ripens and what gets gathered is for others. We are not to get discouraged, but to sow in love.

I don't know what God has in store for God's creation. What I do know is what God wants us to do in the meantime. We are to love and grow. We are to hope. We have been given everything to hope for. We have been promised eternal life in Christ our Lord. We have been called to serve in the kingdom of God, knowing that we are heirs of that kingdom. It is rather like the child of the owner of the company working in the mail room to start. One must show one's ability to take care of the small things in order to be entrusted with the bigger things. We stand to inherit the kingdom with Christ. Now is the time to build that kingdom. Sitting back and letting it rot is not the way.

Our Lord's words to us today are a stark reminder that the reality that we inhabit is not an easy one. There are all sorts of terrible things that happen. But we are to respond in hope, not react in fear. We are better than that. We are called to more than that.

What is called for is hope, diligence, and perspective. We labor on because the work is worth doing. We see setbacks for what they are: not a sign of failure, but an opportunity to start anew. We hope, because we have been promised the greatest gift of all, eternal life in our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ died for us. We are to live for him. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*